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ARCHBISHOP JOHN HUGHES
American Envoy to France (1861)

By
V. F. O'D.

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Who
is the
best man
in the
world

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DOCUMENTS

ARCHBISHOP JOHN HUGHES

American Envoy to France (1861)

The Most Reverend John Hughes, to whom was entrusted the important international mission to be seen in the annexed photographed copy of the letter of William H. Seward, Secretary of State at the time, was a remarkable churchman and endowed with extraordinary parts. Whether we regard him as an ecclesiastic or as a citizen, he will always stand in the front rank of the great men of his adopted country and of the world. Living and dying in stirring times, it was providential for Church and State that John Hughes occupied the post he did. He was born in County Tyrone, Ireland, June 24, 1797.¹ He came to the United States as a young man of twenty in 1817. In Ireland he had succeeded with much difficulty in acquiring an education, and after his arrival in America, with a courage that was little short of heroic, he managed gradually to add to his store of knowledge until he was admitted in 1819 into Mount St. Mary's College, Emmitsburg, Md. There the ardent student's progress was remarkable.² He was raised to the priesthood on October 15, 1826, by Bishop Conwell of Philadelphia, in old St. Joseph's Church, and was sent to St. Augustine's Church in that city. Later he became pastor of St. Joseph's.³ In this new field of labor Father Hughes' tireless energy, his industry and love of study, combined with his great gifts of mind, soon caused him to be recognized as one of the coming lights of the Church in America. His early life as a priest was cast in a period of turmoil and of deep-rooted religious prejudice; but with a strong character that knew no fear, the young clergyman, from the day of his ordination, grappled boldly with the problems which confronted him and attained a success that foretold a brilliant future. His theological controversies, all of which were forced upon him and in all of which he was the victor, were indeed numerous. The historic religious controversy which he had in 1835 with the Reverend John A. Breckenridge, a distinguished non-Catholic divine, served perhaps more than anything else in his early priesthood to reveal Father Hughes' remarkable ability, as well as to draw the attention of the country towards him, and to win him a wide circle of admirers.

On January 7, 1838, Father Hughes was consecrated Coadjutor-Bishop of New York. Four years later he became its fourth Ordinary, and in 1850 its first Metropolitan. In New York he found a sphere of activity at once broader and better suited to the display of his talents, and he was quickly acknowledged as one of the country's leading churchmen, and as one of the intellectual giants

¹ Cf. HASSARD, *Life of John Hughes*. New York, 1866. BRANN, *Life of John Hughes*. New York, 1892. *Works of John Hughes*, published by Kehoe, in two volumes. New York, 1888.

² MCSWEENEY, *The Story of the Mountain*, Vol. i, pp. 89, 99, 126; Vol. ii, pp. 11-12, 41, 108. Emmitsburg, 1911.

³ KIRLIN, *Catholicity in Philadelphia*, pp. 256, 261, 274, 276. Philadelphia, 1909.

of his age. No less patriotic than religious, he took a keen interest in all the questions, religious and civic, which occupied the public mind of the United States. The part he played in the correction of the school system of the city of New York and the bold, effective stand he took against the Native American party in 1844, and the Know-nothing Party in 1854, can never be forgotten by those imbued with the true spirit and genius of our great American republic.

The great Archbishop's singular gifts of mind and heart, together with his uncompromising Catholic spirit, his intense patriotism and deep love for America, kept him prominent also in all social movements. No man of his day, in fact, possessed a more statesmanlike grasp of the genius and democratic spirit of the American commonwealth. Even when the very existence of its institutions was threatened, his confidence was unshaken. He looked upon the Republic as the refuge and the home of those fleeing from oppression, persecution, and poverty in other lands. That this home might be the happier, that the Republic might be more prosperous, and its institutions and its spirit more secure, that here the barriers of national prejudices might be levelled, and the people moulded into one homogeneous nation, he devoted, without thought of honor or of recompense, all his rare powers of oratory, his talents as a controversialist, his ability as a writer, and his commanding genius as a leader of men.

The great Archbishop's utter fearlessness, his towering character, his profound patriotism, and his extraordinary mental endowments won him the confidence and intimate friendship of many of the most distinguished men of his day; while they compelled the respect and commanded the admiration, if not the love, of those who felt the weight of his opposition. In 1846, President Polk proffered the gifted churchman a diplomatic mission to Mexico which he could not accept. In 1847, at the invitation of John C. Calhoun and Stephen A. Douglas, he lectured before Congress in the National Capitol. During the Civil War (1861-65) he spared no effort to conserve our national integrity. His useful suggestions and wise counsel on the conduct of the war were highly appreciated by President Lincoln. "I submit your letters to the President," Seward writes on October 12, 1861, "and he reads all you write to me with deep interest." Hughes' correspondence with Lincoln is still preserved in the *Dunwoodie Archives*. It was in consequence of this correspondence of the war, that the Catholic Archbishop was called to Washington by Secretary Seward in October, 1861, and entrusted with the important commission revealed in the following letter, the original of which is carefully kept in the *Dunwoodie Archives*.

(Transcription)

Department of State,
Washington, Nov. 2, 1861.

To His Grace

Archbishop Hughes.

Sir:

You will repair to Paris and will deliver to Mr. Dayton⁴ the despatch herewith handed to you. You will, on your way thither, make yourself master of the contents thereof by reading the copy which is confidentially entrusted to you.⁵ You

⁴ WILLIAM LEWIS DAYTON (1807-64) was United States Minister to France from 1861-1864

⁵ This copy (37 pp.), dated Department of State, Washington, October 30, 1861, from Mr. Seward to Mr. Dayton, still exists among the *Hughes MSS.* at Dunwoodie Seminary

will confer with Mr. Dayton upon the subject, and explain to him verbally my views in desiring the fullest attainable knowledge of the dispositions of the French Government, whether friendly or otherwise, and especially its views on the several questions set forth in my despatch. At the same time you will be expected to do this in the most confidential manner, deferring in all cases to Mr. Dayton's judgment, and acting as auxiliary to him only at his cheerful request, and only to the extent that he thinks your relations and associations in Paris and in Europe may enable you to be useful to him.

He will be expected to receive you as a trusted, confidential, loyal and devoted citizen, who assumes this duty at much sacrifice to himself, and only on the earnest request of the President of the United States, upon mature conviction of its importance resulting from a conference with his advisers.

While in Paris, you will study how, in conjunction with Mr. Dayton, you can promote healthful opinions concerning the great cause in which our country is now engaged in arms. You will extend your visit to any part of Europe you may think proper, and will consider yourself at liberty to stay until recalled.*

I have the honor to be

Your Grace's very obedient servant,

WILLIAM H. SEWARD.

It was largely through the Archbishop's efforts that France was prevented from following in the footsteps of England, and throwing the weight of her sympathies with the Confederate States. Wherever he traveled in Europe, he was accorded an honorable reception. He left nothing undone to promote the cause of the Union, and did much to enlist the sympathies of the Old World in the preservation of the American Republic. Again, at the time of the draft riots in the city of New York in 1863, his services were requested by Governor Horatio Seymour to quiet the disorders. Although much broken in health, the patriotic Metropolitan readily accepted the call to duty, and addressed the excited people with good effect. This was one of his last public acts; from that time he rapidly declined in health until the day of his death, January 3, 1864. In all his public deeds, however, the great Catholic Archbishop but followed the teachings of his Church, doing for his own country on the patriotic scale afforded him by his own superior talents, what his confreres have always done the world over.

* Archbishop Hughes left Paris, February, 1862, and visited Ireland, where his presence aroused an intense enthusiasm for the North. Later in the same month he went to Rome, where he had the opportunity of informing Pius IX and Cardinal Antonelli of the true state of affairs in America. On leaving Rome he set out for Spain, but his health prevented him from reaching Madrid. Later he travelled through France and England, and preached at the laying of the corner-stone of the Catholic University of Dublin, on July 20, 1862. He sailed early from Queenstown in August for New York, and arrived there on August 12. "On the archbishop's arrival, the whole city turned out to greet him. The municipal authorities presented him with congratulatory addresses. After a few days' rest he went to Washington. There he was invited to dinner by Secretary Seward. The day fixed for the dinner was Friday, and the Archbishop suggested that it was not a good day for a banquet. 'Never mind,' said the secretary, 'I shall see that you will be provided for.' When the very large and distinguished company met in the dining hall, there was no meat of any kind on the table. All were compelled to eat fish. The Archbishop often said that this was the most delicate compliment ever paid to him. Mr. Lincoln's Government soon after intimated to the Holy See that it would be pleased if the Archbishop, who had done so much for the country, should be raised to the dignity of cardinal." BRANN, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-66.

His correspondence with Mr. Seward was an extensive one, as can be seen from the numerous letters of the Secretary of State still preserved in the Archdiocesan Archives of New York, at Dunwoodie Seminary. From their general tenor, the choice of the Archbishop to offset the influence of Mason and Slidell, who had already gone to Europe as Commissioners of the Confederate States, is not at all surprising. The honor conferred upon him by his country was fully justified, and the story of his mission, with the details of his interviews with French statesmen, and particularly with Napoleon III and the Empress, will always be a vital part of the history of the Civil War.

V. F. O'D.

Department of State,

Washington, 2nd Nov. 1861.

To His Grace

Archbishop Hughes.

Sir,

You will repair to Paris and will deliver to Mr. Dayton the attached herewith handed to you. You will, on your way thither, make yourself master of the contents thereof, by reading the copy which is confidentially entrusted to you. You will confer with Mr. Dayton upon the subject and explain to him our truly my views in desiring the father of the Union to know of the disposition of the French Government

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Your Grace's very cordial servant,

Wm. H. Seward.

SECRETARY SEWARD TO ARCHBISHOP HUGHES, NOVEMBER 2, 1861.

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